

North Africa

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# The Fiction of Architectural Identity in Contemporary Morocco

On 14 January 1986, H.M. Hassan II, the late King of Morocco, delivered a speech on architecture. The speech was addressed to a small gathering of architects selected by the Ministry of the Interior as representatives of their profession. The King of Morocco, unlike Prince Charles, was a true ruler and his speech was not meant as an art critique. Rather, it was intended to clarify a new incipient politics of urban design. This new politics, which intended to promote a return to 'traditional' architectural culture, was in open contradiction to the former official discourse of modernization. How can one understand this return to traditional forms? Was this an index of failure in the process of modernization initiated by the state after Independence, or rather an issue of strong societal resistance towards modernization, calling for a new politics of urban design?

uses space to 'regulate' the economy and grant financial opportunities and subsidies to targeted groups obscures a much deeper political process in the construction of urban space: the maintenance of social control and coercion not only through a Haussmannian conception of space (Walter Benjamin) but

clearly both a discursive entity created by narrativity (Homi Bhabha 1990) and marked by a distinction between the political realm of nationalism, which is influenced by metropolitan precedents, and the cultural realm, where different 'nationalist' patterns are perpetuated (Partha Chatterjee 1986 and 1993). Moreover, the implementation of that politics does not rely only on narrativity, it also calls in different institutional and legal strategies and tactics, rituals and economic practices. In a word, it is a complex power strategy in perpetual adaptation (Foucault 1979). This strategy aims to maintain social control through the fiction of an architectural identity.

By deconstructing the ideological fiction of architectural identity in contemporary Morocco, a space can be created for architectural and urban criticism: lifting the taboos imposed on architectural style and urban debates. It is therefore necessary to discern the many components of this architectural reformulation, pointing out their intricacies:

– *The construction and ritualization of an official discourse on architecture: Le Discours sur l'Architecture.* To commemorate the significance of the King's 1986 speech, 'Le Jour de l'Architecture' (Architecture Day) was officially declared by the Minister of the Interior in 1992. It is celebrated each year by the Ministry of Urbanism in collaboration with the Ordre National des Architectes (National Order of Architects). The commemoration has been constructed as a ritual. The ceremony starts with a Qur'anic recitation and a showing of His Majesty's 1986 Speech on Architecture. Nothing could be more telling since any religious ceremony begins with a Qur'anic recitation.

– *Institutional strategies, and reformation of laws:* The second important effect of the royal speech comprises the reform of the law on urbanism and the creation of new institutions of city planning. After the 1981 urban riots in Casablanca, urbanism strongly attracted the strategic attention of the state. The political reaction to these riots was to reform the administrative organisms of that city and to create a state agency specialized in urbanism. Following the royal speech, with its diverse guidelines for architecture and urbanism, it was considered time to reform the law on urbanism, which was inherited from the French.

The reformation of law and the institutional changes functioned as complementary devices of denial of the failure of the national policy and of coercion in the management of urban development.

– *The share of the professionals:* One of the strategies of the new politics was related to the need to mobilize all the actors involved in architectural production. The professional associations, and in particular that of the architects, were called to play a major role in the policy of the style. However, most of the reactions remained unspoken. Why is it that, in a country where democratization is supposed to be progressing, and where architectural production is far from being uniform, such an important debate has to be avoided?

It can be hypothesized that because of the weaknesses of their professional status, the controversies about their knowledge, and the competition with other professionals, most architects became part of the game by sup-

porting it, or by not publicly taking any critical position. Building on Foucault's view (1997) that power is productive of knowledge, it can be argued that the architect's political involvement was the opportunity to promote the profession of architect and to re-create a professional knowledge.

– *Architectural conservation and the negation of history:* Conservation of historic buildings and urban sites was first introduced to Morocco by Maréchal Lyautey, the Résident Général of the French Protectorate. In the 1970s, after a long period of neglect, the Moroccan government with the help of UNESCO turned back to that politics. But this politics has had little effect in the field. Interestingly the few works of conservation which took place do not respect the international norms: the buildings are reconstructed anew with the pretext that 'Moroccan architectural tradition has never died.'

The claim of continuity of that tradition used as a metaphor of cultural perennial is in fact a pure denial of history.

– *The fiction of architectural identity:* The actual development of Moroccan architecture suggests that the new politics of urban design is mainly a fiction. Indeed, the first official urban project of independent Morocco is strikingly modernist: the city of Agadir, which was rebuilt after its destruction in the earthquake of 1960. On the other hand, there is a great architectural diversity.

Here the hypothesis is that the fiction of architectural identity functions as a Freudian negation, adenal of the actual hybridization of contemporary Moroccan architecture.

– *Refashioning the urban landscape:* A delirious reshaping of the urban landscape took place after the royal speech on architecture of 1986. Soon this refashioning resulted in a disastrous uniformity of the urban landscape.

Through the analysis of the architectural refashioning projects it is possible to point out that despite the promotion of narratives about Moroccan architectural identity, the implementation of that politics was practically mimicking the French colonial politics of urban design. It is also possible to realize that the creation of a fiction of architectural identity functions as a Freudian denial of the objective stakes of urban development (housing problems, spatial control, and hidden distribution of subsidies). This could function only because many patterns of cultural nationalism were available in the political nationalist realm.

## References

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## Note

- \* Theme of the author's current research.

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## Ait Ourir Children's S.O.S. Village, Morocco.

The question of the political use of architecture and urban design as a means to create and promote cultural identities through which social control and coercion are implemented is of great political and academic interest. It has generated a wealth of literature and heated debates. Yet it has mainly been addressed within Western and colonial contexts, and largely ignored with reference to the post-colonial period. In the context of a developing country such as Morocco, marked by the perception of architecture and urban design as a formative dimension of cultural identity, the intervention of international organizations in development and housing programmes is often perceived as biased and neglectful of basic cultural phenomena. For instance, relying on a fundamentalist discourse on authentic traditional Moroccan family life style, government officials oppose the economic standards of international organizations and their disregard for the Moroccan cultural requirement for specific forms of space and ownership. No matter whether the claim is contradicted by the informal and formal practices of urban production, the official discourse stands as political defence of national cultural identity.

The forms of urbanization and the spread of shanty towns and informal housing in the new urban landscape, along with a succession of spectacular urban riots (1981, 1984, 1990) have been reflected upon in different ways by national and international scholars. But the problem with existing approaches is that they are dominated by concerns of population, urban geography, and academic compartmentalization. To address this lacuna, at one level, it is crucial to remember that the urban context is not simply a reflection of the demographic and economic evolution of society. Indeed, the well-documented and frequently researched notion that urbanism

also more subtly through the construction of a politics of cultural identity embodied in urban design.

While colonial architecture and urbanism have received substantial scholarly attention in the last two decades, post-colonial urban design has yet to be seriously studied. Students of the colonial period have generally shared the assumption that a politics of urban design shaped colonial architecture and city planning. They all suggest that colonial architecture and urban design were a medium for the production of images of cultural identity and otherness.

The question of traditional architecture and its relevance for contemporary practices in Islamic countries was addressed by the programme of the Aga Khan Award of Architecture through many seminars and publications.

## The Moroccan case

The galloping urbanization of the last decades and the ensuing social and housing problems have attracted the attention of many academics and international organizations. Unfortunately the literature concerning these issues is extremely limited. But the politics of urban design did not receive much attention from scholars in the field. Despite the consistent and conspicuous involvement of the state in defining a new architectural culture, and its claim of initiating a revival of authentic national identity, scholarly works continued to view urbanism as limited to its role in the regulation of economy and regional planning.

It is vital to study the implementation of that politics and to show how and why, despite its alleged rejection, the colonial architectural legacy has been a main source of inspiration to the foundation of a nationalist discourse on architecture.\* This nationalism is